

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

CONTENTS

TO THE EDGE OF MURDER <i>by Helen Nielsen</i>	2
DEATH OVERDUE <i>by Eleanor Daly Boylan</i>	11
✓ SUCH THINGS HAPPEN AT NIGHT <i>by Jack Ritchie</i>	18
THE ACTRESS <i>by Alex Austin</i>	22
LETTER FROM A VERY WORRIED MAN <i>by Jay Street</i>	34
SAY IT ISN'T SO, RUBY MARTINSON <i>by Henry Slesar</i>	37
DEATH OF A V.I.P. <i>by C. B. Gilford</i>	46
THE MOTHER GOOSE MADMAN <i>by Betty Ren Wright</i>	56
LAST DRINK <i>by O. H. Leslie</i>	63
THE MURDER WAS PERFECT <i>by Hans Ruesch</i>	70
ONE CRIME TOO MANY <i>by Douglas Farr</i>	86
DARK ENCOUNTER <i>by Donald Campbell</i>	100
ACT OF VIOLENCE <i>by Arthur Gordon</i>	108
OPERATION STAYING-ALIVE <i>by William Link and Richard Levinson</i>	120

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SUCH THINGS HAPPEN AT NIGHT

by Jack Ritchie

It was five in the morning when I opened the big rear door for ventilation. I sat down on some cases of canned milk and lit a cigarette.

The tall thin man stepped out of the alley darkness and into the doorway.

I should have told him that he had no business in here, but the bulge in his side pocket meant something, and I waited.

He closed the door behind him and dropped the latch. His smile was thin. "I've been waiting since one o'clock."

I took the cigarette out of my mouth. "What is it, Mister?"

His hand didn't move to the pocket, but it could be there in a second. "How much would be in that safe in the front of the store?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Like ten thousand?"

"I've no idea. Nobody lets me handle it."

His eyes went over me. "What are you around here?"

"The night stock boy," I said.

He grinned. "Not much of a job for a big man like you."

"It keeps me out of trouble."

He took the gun out of his pocket now.

I ground out my cigarette. "What am I supposed to do? Give you the combination?"

He rubbed the .45 on the side of his pants leg. "That's a nice way of calling me stupid. I don't expect anything from you, stockboy. What time does the manager get here?"

"About seven-thirty."

"And when's the store open?"

"Eight. That's when the clerks show up."

He sat down and his eyes flicked to his watch. "Tell me about stockboys. We got time."

I shook another cigarette from my pack. "When the store closes at nine, nine P.M., I start my work. I unload a semi and when it goes away, I spend the rest of the night and morning stamping the cans and putting them on the shelves."

"A real brain-busting job."

"I eat."

He played with the automatic snap clip in and out. "You through for the day?"

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"Taking a break. I got one aisle and the window display to do yet."

He took off his suitcoat and hat and slipped into one of the white aprons from the wall hook. He put the .45 in his back pocket. "Don't let me keep you from earning your pay."

We walked out into the store.

"I thought you were about through," he said. "The place is a mess."

"Just empty boxes," I said. "I clean them up the last thing." I moved to aisle 5. "This is the one I haven't finished yet."

I picked up the hook knife. "This is just for boxes. It isn't good for anything else."

He shrugged. "I wasn't worried. Use it." He leaned on one of the shelves and watched me slash open three sides of a carton.

I turned the wheels of my rubber stamp and began putting the prices on the tops of the cans.

After fifteen minutes he spoke. "How come you remember all the prices?"

"I'm good with numbers," I said. "I always remember."

"I don't care much for numbers."

I thought I knew what he meant, but I didn't say anything.

"How are you on faces?"

I inked the stamp carefully. "I can't even remember what my brother looks like. When I don't want to."

His laugh was low.

I looked at him. "I don't own any stock in the company. Why should I remember a face? You could come back."

Outside the store a man with a lunch pail stopped and looked in.

The tall man began putting cans on a shelf. "What does he want?"

"Nothing," I said. "A lot of people go to work around this time."

When we were alone again, the tall man tossed a can back into the carton. "I wasn't cut out to be a stockboy."

"Who the hell was?"

He laughed. "At least you don't like it. That's something."

I changed the price tags on a shelf edge. "There's a cop goes by here every morning around 6:30."

He stiffened.

"Just goes by," I said. "It's routine."

His voice was soft. "If I get hurt, you'll bleed worse"

There is nothing quite like spending a night talking to a robber bent on robbery. Everything is so serene and yet dramatic. And the conversation is not idle chitchat; it probes the ethical problems of our times.

SUCH THINGS HAPPEN AT NIGHT

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"I know."

He relaxed. "Think you'll be a stockboy long?"

I looked at him. "Why not?"

He grinned. "You weren't supposed to open that back door? Against regulations?"

I wiped my hands on the apron, and said nothing.

He chuckled. "What's to worry you? There's a thousand jobs better than this one."

His eyes went to the safe in the front of the store and he might have been talking to himself. "All small stuff. No big bills to worry about. No marked money. No serial numbers on somebody's list."

It was after dawn when Larkin stopped in front of the show windows. He rubbed the back of his neck with his nightstick and yawned.

The tall man and I were at the end of the aisle near the window.

He got busy putting cans on the shelves. "What do you do? Wave to him, or something?"

"He doesn't expect it from me." But I looked at Larkin and the badge above his big belly and nodded.

Larkin moved on and the tall man stopped working.

"He'll be back," I said. "He has a cup of coffee at the all-night restaurant down the street. Then he comes back this way to put in his call at the corner box."

"Play it easy," the tall man said. "Remember I'm here."

I lit a cigarette and watched the smoke drift up.

"You're strong on taking breaks," he said.

I came out of my thoughts, and hand-trucked a dozen cases of tomato juice to the narrow display shelf under the show windows.

The tall man moved down the aisle and glanced idly at the shelves.

I turned the wheels of my stamp to the right number and began marking the big No. 3 cans.

I finished in twenty minutes and was staking empty cartons behind the cash register when Larkin came by again.

He stopped at the display. Then he looked up at me.

I picked up the wide push broom and began cleaning up the aisles.

When I looked up, Larkin was gone.

At quarter after seven I put away the broom and took off my apron.

"What now?" the tall man asked.

"Nothing. I'm through. I leave when the manager gets here."

He grinned. "Not this time."

Morrison was five minutes late. It was seven thirty-five when he unlocked the front door.

The tall man stepped out of a blind spot near the door. He held the automatic so that no one passing could see it. "The safe, Mister."

Morrison's face got white and he didn't argue with the gun.

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We moved past the row of cash registers and around the stack of hundred pound bags of sugar.

Morrison's fingers shook. but I watched him get the combination the first time.

The tall man hefted the gray canvas sacks inside the safe and took the ones with the paper in them. He picked a ball of heavy twine off a shelf and waved the gun. "Get to the rear of the store."

In the back room, he tossed the twine to me. He indicated Morrison. "Tie him up and make it fast."

When I was through with Morrison, it was my turn.

The tall man didn't do a good job on me. I knew I could get free in five minutes. But that wouldn't matter to him. All he wanted was a little time.

When he was through, he looked down at us and his grin was satisfied. He opened the back door.

They were waiting for him.

Larkin and a half a dozen others.

I could see the tall man's back stiffen as he looked into the ring of .38's.

Then his hands went up and the two gray bags under his arm dropped to the floor.

It was after nine before I could slip into my jacket and get ready to go.

"I'll be sure to bring this to the attention of your parole board, Willie," Mr. Morrison said.

I pulled the zipper up. "Thank you, Mr. Morrison."

"I believe in giving a man a break," he said. "And it paid off. Willie, you saved the company over fifteen thousand dollars."

A couple more reporters came into the crowded store and Larkin started his story again.

"The first thing I noticed," he said, "was that all the tomato cans in the window were upside down."

"There'll be a reward for you, Willie," Mr. Morrison said. "The last time something like this happened, the company gave out five hundred dollars."

"Thank you, Mr. Morrison," I said.

Larkin was still talking. "And when I looked closer, there was my badge number stamped on every one of them cans." He tried to look modest. "So I put two and two together."

I put on my cap.

Morrison patted my shoulder. "We'll see you tonight. Regular time."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Morrison," I said. "I'll be back at nine."

I smiled as I walked past the safe. Thank you, Mr. Morrison, for showing me the combination. Thirty to the right, one full turn left and stop at sixteen...

I lit a cigarette at the bus stop.

It would be good to get my hands on some real money again. About fifteen thousand dollars of it.